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AUTHOR Reohr, Janet R.
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ABSTRACT

Social support systems within academia, particularly those of mentor and colleague, are examined. Although both relationships are valued by academics, there is lack of consensus as to the characteristics and purposes of each. The mentor relationship can be defined as maintaining clear social and intellectual status differences. The value of this relationship is found in these status differences, which allow the mentor to use his or her greater influence to help the younger academic. The colleague relationship is distinguished by its equality. It also can be significant in the arduous socialization process within academia. In the business world, mentor-protege and colleague relationships are more likely to occur because of the interdependent working conditions, and are often structured intentionally. The same is not true of the academic world; those who occupy the most marginal status--the young, untenured faculty--could most benefit from mentors or colleagues, but because of their positions they are the least likely to have the benefit of such relationships. (Author/MSE)

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Mentor and Colleague Relationships in Academia

Janet R. Reohr, Ed.D.

Russell Sage College
Junior College of Albany

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Abstract

This paper investigates the social support systems within academia particularly mentor and colleague relationships. Although both mentor and colleague are felt to be very important by academics, there is a lack of consensus as to the characteristics and purposes of such relationships.

The mentor relationship can be defined as maintaining clear social and intellectual status differences. The value of this relationship is found precisely in the status differences which allow the mentor to use his/her greater influence to help the younger academic. The colleague relationship is distinquished by its equality. It also can be significant in the arduous socialization process within the academic realm.

Whereas in the business world mentor-protege and colleague relationships are more likely because of the interdependent working conditions and are often structured intentionally, the same is not true of the academic world. Those who occupy the most marginal status, the young, untenured faculty, could most benefit from mentors or colleagues but because of their positions they are the least likely to have the benefit of such relationships.

The world of the academic has been growing increasingly more precarious. Educators have focused study and dialogues on various circumstances leading to our present situation yet very little attention has been focused on social support systems. In fact as the economic crunch increases in intensity the competitiveness increasingly jeopardizes these social support systems which, although unable to change the economic conditions, can play a part in improving the quality of work life and influencing the professional survival of at least some academicians. Two relations, colleague and mentor, are of particular significance in promoting professional and personal development and in ameliorating stress. I would like to focus my comments on delineating aspects of these two relations, comparing these relations in academia with their counterparts in the business world and noting the value these relations may have particularly to women and young professionals. Although there is very little research available in this area I hope to stimulate some different kinds of thinking about these significant relations and their impact for academia particularly.

Webster's dictionary defines mentor as a wise and faithful counselor, and although individuals' definitions fit this broad framework, they have a great deal of variation within this definition. It seems that individuals in academia generally happen upon mentors and define the term from their individual experiences with mentors rather than holding perceptions of what they ought to be and striving to obtain that type of relationship. Without experience of mentors some people find it difficult to define the term.

It is perhaps Daniel Levinson's (1978) work that has most recently spawned investigation on the topic of mentors. In Levinson's study with a sample of forty males, mentors played prominent roles in the personal growth and professional development of these men. The mentor acted as a teacher by enchancing skills and intellectual development. He was a sponsor, using his influence to facilitate movement into and upwards in an organization. The mentor acted as a role model and counsel to the young man and fostered the learning and development of appropriate behaviors in regards to the customs and values of the organization. In addition the mentor provided emotional support and helped to facilitate what Levinson called the realization of the Dream or life goals of the young adult. (pp. 98-99)

Colleagues may play a similar salient role to those of a mentor. Colleagues are considered crucial to work survival according to a small sample of college professors I interviewed and other evidence points in this same direction. According to Mackie (1977) "A normal career without colleague support in unthinkable." Sociologists of work suggest that collegial relations are one of the distinguishing aspects of the professions. (p. 278) Even though they seem to occupy a significant place in the minds of educators there is a paucity of information regarding colleagues. Individuals I interviewed in my present work had wide descriptions of colleagues. Some defined them as everyone at an institution who had common goals including staff, while others viewed only those who were directly involved emotionally and intellectually with their own personal development as colleagues. Personality and prior experience seem to influence perceptions of what a colleague ought to be.

Colleagues and mentors have a number of similarities yet points of distinction are likely to be the most valuable characteristics of each. Both types of relationships are reciprocal. In the mentor-protege relationship the mentor gives a great deal from his store of wisdom and experience. The protege in return gives open respect, admiration, support and information. (Fenn, 1980, pp. 27-28) Although the relationship has rights and obligations on both sides there is a clear disparity in intellectual and social status. Also a disparity in age, is according to Levinson, important to the development and usefulness of the mentor-protege relationship. Approximately one half generation the elder, the mentor has greater knowledge and represents the advanced level toward which the protege is striving. This age difference of between eight and fifteen years is sufficient to discourage the two from seeing each other as colleagues yet not so large as to create a parent-child type of relation. (1978, p. 99)

A relationship between colleagues is one of equality and reciprocity with each providing similar or complimentary but generally equivalent contributions. The two are likely to be closer in age with little status difference thus asking for and giving help are less encumbered by feelings of neediness and obligation and the interaction flows more freely. Whereas colleagues tend to support each other, the mentor supports the protege and receives in return respect and gratitude but not direct professional support. Thus the distinguishing characteristics of the colleague allow a similar perspective and perhaps more empathetic emotional, personal, and professional support. The distinguishing characteristics of the mentor relationship is the social and intellectual status difference which allows the mentor to sponsor professional development and advancement.

In the business world the espoused approach at least is intentional structuring of mentor and colleague relations. Rosabeth Kantor (1977) has indicated that mentors are very important to success of men in business and absolutely essential to women's success. (p. 183) The literature in business focused on developing managerial understanding and competence discusses how to find mentors and develop a relationship with those who can be most helpful in professional success. (Fenn, 1980; Josefowitz, 1980)

In education there are few examples of structured mentor relations. The small amount of evidence available, however, indicates that for educators at least, mentors are found almost exclusively in graduate school, and seem to develop as a matter of course between graduate student and dissertation advisor as an outgrowth of earlier association in classes. A later more structured relationship of major advisor and graduate student, with defined roles, may develop but the student does not seek this individual out for the purpose of securing sponsorship in the professional realm. In a small unpublished study by Miller, et al. over three fourths of the college professors surveyed said that they had had mentors and most of these mentors were dissertation advisors. (1981) From the evidence Miller collected and my present work, college professors don't have mentors once they leave graduate school. From the relationships in practice we might assume mentors serve different purposes in the academic and business worlds.

In business a mentor relation exists in the organization as the protege is working and the mentor can assist with on the job training or socialization into this particular organization. The same is not true for the world of education. Graduate school is not on the job training, even if considering experience as a teaching assistant.

Graduate school is preparation for later work. Educators, one might claim, should have learned all that is necessary for teaching during their graduate experience and not need mentors. Apparently however, new faculty do not fell confident in their ability to teach. (Bruhns & Thomsen, 1974, p. 99) As Bess (1978) points out there is a difference between professionalization and socialization. Professionalization, "a process by which students learn skills, values, and norms of a profession" can partly, at least, occur in graduate school. Socialization, "the process of adopting values, norms and social roles which constrain behavior in an organizational setting," must occur in the work organization itself. (p. 292) According to Bess "The experience of graduate school at best results in a moderately skilled faculty member. There remains the completion of the educational process which takes place during the untenured years of the faculty career....The early years in the faculty career are also times for 'resocialization'...where the formal purpose is to make up for or correct some deficiency in early socialization." (p. 297) From what Bess is indicating the young faculty member, who by virtue of the terminal degree he or she holds in hand, has completed the rites of passage into the academic world, but still could greatly benefit from a wise and faithful counselor, more like the relationship encouraged in business.

One interesting example of a structured mentor relation in higher education (the only example I could find in higher education) is a program developed by Empire State College, a division of the State University system of New York. This undergraduate level program for adult learners assigns each new student to a faculty mentor at the beginning of his or her program. Together the mentor and student plan

an individualized degree program for this student. The mentor and student devise various learning contracts based on this degree program plan. The mentor is responsible for helping the student plan and coordinate a course of study. The mentor is a resource for available courses, field placements and acts as instructor in the area of his or her expertise. Independent study credits between student and mentor may be contracted. In a capacity beyond that of advisor, the mentor works directly with the student as he or she moves through the program, re-evaluating directions and providing personal counsel and advise. (Empire State College Bulletin, 1978-80, p. 10) The student completes a very personalized degree program at his or her own pace with the constant attention of the mentor.

The differing circumstances of business may also create a difference in colleague relations. In business people often work together collaboratively on projects or serially, one after the other. Because business people are interdependent it is of utmost importance to create good working collegial relations. Josefowitz makes suggestions to aspiring executives about the ways of fostering collegial relations which will be personally beneficial to success at work. For the educator, the major activity of work, educating others, is separated from what peers are doing. What must be done in class or with students depends on some school regulations but basically is independent. The lack of interdependent needs in teaching is likely to influence the formation of collegial relations. The areas of research and publishing require some social relations, according to Mullins, such as serious discussion and co-authorship. (Mullins as cited in Mackie, 1977, p. 279) But this kind of relating is likely to follow the development of a social support system of colleagues rather than proceed and foster it.

The absence of collegial or mentor relationships have the most severe effects on those who occupy marginal positions in academia, junior untenured and women faculty. It is precisively the positions these people hold that makes it difficult for them to find and develop such relationships.

Untenured faculty are faced with the tasks of sharpening teaching skills, learning about the organization of the school and institutional and discipline-oriented networks which can provide intellectual, informational, and professional support. Lack of professional connections can easily be the demise of the unestablished faculty person. Bess (1978) indicates that new faculty members need further socialization beyond graduate school within the work environment. He says "The heavy informal controls and sanctions laid on the struggling untenured assistant professor serve to orient him toward the path of valued activities and constrain him from deviating too obviously from accepted standards." (p. 297) From the viewpoint Bess promotes it is the organization that is concerned with socialization of new members. Senior faculty or more experienced junior faculty can help socialization of new faculty and in this way have a direct influence on who is successful in academia thereby also influencing the directions of the institution in the future.

Women faculty hold very tenuous positions within higher education. Women, in all but Women's colleges work in male dominated, male oriented organizations. Hornig (1980) notes that "Numerous studies in [the] field agree that women faculty are overconcentrated in the least prestigious institutions and in the lower ranks, carry a disproportionate share of teaching loads especially at introductory levels and are seriously underpaid at all levels when rank, field, Ph.D. cohort, type of institution and work functions are held constant." (p. 115) To succeed women faculty

have to do more to be recognized and promoted in their institutions, yet they occupy positions which make, for example, research and publishing more difficult. That is they are less likely to deal with graduate students who might become involved in their work. They are less likely to work in institutions that provide support for research and publishing. The old catch 22; women have a harder time getting recognition because they occupy positions where they have little ability to do things to get recognized.

Social supports of colleagues and mentors can have a profound effect on women faculty's survival in academia. Unfortunately such relations seem quite hard to find. Women often feel they are competing against one another to hold the token female position and they are hesistant to work collaboratively with one another because of this. Since women are more likely to be found at the lowest levels in the hierarchy they have far less effect in sponsoring or promoting other women.

Personal history may push women toward colleague and mentor relations with men. Women are more often engaged in cross-gender mentorship relations in graduate school and generally have a much greater chance of having had cross-gender role models in early years. Thus their socialization has been largely influenced by males and they may be more skilled at dealing with men than other women. Yet developing support networks with men are difficult. Diane George suggests that men would prefer to keep professional and personal, or as it has been called, labor and love issues separate. I would add that women are also fearful of the merging of these two spheres. Women's entrance into academia creates a problem and developing collegial or mentor relations with men is hampered. Their identifying with men does not necessarily make them, shall we say,

more attractive to men as potential colleagues or proteges.

For professional people, like educators, according to Friedman "The collegial group is...the only competent arbiter of work performance." (as cited in Mackie, 1977, p. 278) It is then the responsibility of educators to actively support those they feel can most capably carry on the business of education. One way to do this is forming colleague and mentor relations. Mentors and colleagues can have a salient effect upon professional and personal success. They in addition can make work more fulfilling and enjoyable. More research is needed in the area of mentor and colleague relations to determine the import they have on success and what part they play in the educational process. Clearer evidence might encourage individuals to seek mentors more actively and purposively as is the plan in business. Structuring mentor and colleague relations might also be beneficial to all parties.

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